

BRIDGING THE GAP ACROSS CULTURES THROUGH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

As distances between countries are bridged through the coming together of communities, the necessity to understand world cultures assumes significance. Only with a proper understanding of the values and norms of the different cultures and the basic concepts and principles that these communities relate to, can different cultures be appreciated, relationships built, problems addressed and conditions improved. Art, music and painting are important forms which reveal the character of a culture. To this can be added literature. As literature is believed not only to present society but also re-present it, much can be achieved through a reading of it, be it in the form of prose, poetry or the novel. This paper is an attempt to see how the hybridization or creolization of languages and the linking of different languages can contribute significantly towards the bridging of the gap across cultures through literature.

KEYWORDS: World Cultures, Values and Norms, Hybridization or Creolization, Linking of Languages

INTRODUCTION

“The greatest distance between people is not geographical space, but culture” (Jamake Highwater, 1978). Although this is an age which would do just as well with minimal competencies and survival or life skills, nevertheless the truth is, the world is made up of many cultures and it would be worth understanding the values and norms of these cultures as well as the basic concepts and principles that these world communities relate to.

Williams (1958, 16-17) traces the origin of the word *culture*, to the ‘tending of natural growth’ or human training. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the meaning turned to the mind with the focus on the complete human being. Secondly it referred to how the society developed intellectually on the whole; thirdly, to the arts and fourthly, to the material, intellectual and spiritual aspects of life.

Culture in short refers to a group or community of people who have a similar outlook of the world as their experiences are common. This may include race, gender, class or religion or even a change in economic status or group dynamics. By virtue of this understanding, in any given location, many cultures co-exist. In the United State, a country of diverse religions, languages, economic groups and other cultural groups, it is expected that not very far in the future, one out of every three Americans will be a non-white. In this scenario the need to understand and appreciate cultures is paramount if we want to build relationships with people from other cultures, resolve problems or improve conditions.

If art, music and painting play major roles in understanding cultures, to this pantheon can be added, literature. The Roman poet Horace (65-8 B.C) could not have been more true when he said that literature is *dulce et utile* (sweet and useful). Literary texts have a dual purpose – to entertain and to educate, turning out to be exquisite objects of beauty as well as messengers of information.

Whether authors intend it or not, all literature attempts to convey some values and ideas which may not be obvious, packaged as it may be, in an entertaining and beautiful manner but which is there to see for a discerning eye.

Many a time, authors consciously or unconsciously resort to a symbolic form to convey their ideas. Even the simple Aesops' fables serve to convey rich morals through simple narratives. Since all literary works must necessarily be the products of specific human beings of repute, belonging to specific cultures, they are likely to be influenced by the historical, cultural as well as circumstantial events which may have shaped the author's thinking. The literature of a particular culture may seek to promote and disseminate the cultural values and world views of that culture which the author and people in position feel strongly about.

The author may accept, oppose or be ambiguous about the belief systems of his society. It is essential therefore not only to have an insight of some literary works of the time but a sound knowledge about the historical and cultural aspects which includes art, music, philosophy, religion, science and politics of which literature is a part and parcel. Literature can thus be said to be an interdisciplinary venture which tries to capture and express the experience that human beings go through to understand themselves and the world around them. Unlike direct discourse, literary texts resort to indirect allusion, concealing the message they intend to convey in a sense of mystery appealing to different emotions. Beyond the subtleties and intricacies of the different layers lie the moral or the meaning that the text seeks to convey. For this, different forms of expression like the rhetoric, figures of speech, symbols, etc are used.

The use of symbols, allegories, metaphors, metonymies and similes requires a careful reading of the text to unearth the underlying meaning. Wading through the maze of symbols and ideas, the reader should be sharp enough to figure out the meaning of these symbols and ideas.

History stands testimony to the fact that more than half the world has been at some point or other been colonized – be it by the French, Germans, Russians, Japanese or the English. When Algeria was colonized by the French, many Spanish, Italian and French people were transported to North Africa. As they had worked as stokers in the ships, they went on to be called *pieds-noirs* (black feet). Although with colonization, the colonized lost their identity; their sad plight might have remained obscure if not for writers who chose to bring it to light through their literature.

The nameless Arab in Camus' *L'Etranger* (1942) (The Outsider) is but one example. *La Peste* (1947) (The Plague) is not only a chronicle of the imprisonment, exile, oppression and suffering that the citizens of Oran experience in the wake of a plague but also the victory of human spirit and solidarity over something that threatens to destroy them. The plague is not only an obvious reference to the stifling air and the atmosphere of threat and exile that prevailed during the Nazi occupation but extends to the notion of existence as well. (Notebook II, 53).

Golding's *The Spire* (1964) transforms what appears to be the simple construction of a spire to a complex drama of human conflict. The paradoxical relationship between the good and the bad, the weak moral standards and self delusions of a society form the theme of this narrative as the spire symbolizes pride and egotism as well as vitality and creativity.

In a world where boundaries seem to be disappearing, there is a need to focus on certain areas of study like the multiplicity and plurality of languages, the linking of different languages and the place of world literature in the post colonial era. The hybridization or *creolization* of languages assumes significance in this context. Several writers who were concerned about this were Homi Bhabha, the Indian born writer who wrote on the notion of hybridity based on his reading of the Blacks and who speaks about the emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiselle and Raphael Confiant – the three Martiniquais intellectuals and writers, representatives of contemporary Caribbean literature who want to see the advent of a hybridized world, Gloria Anzaldua whose work revolves around the 'new *mestiza* consciousness,

Which advocates a hybrid, flexible, and pluralistic world; or Ying Chen, the Francophone Asian Canadian writer,

who, writing from her own experience, invites readers to meet through the universal experience of exile, be it geographic or social.

While European writers expressed the feelings of alienation, existentialist angst and disintegration through their works, it was the plight of man caught in the dialectics of modernization, a legacy left behind by the colonizers that were the concerns of the Indian writers. Many well known writers of the post – colonial India were obsessed by this struggle between an indigenous and an alien culture. Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (2008) is an example of the plight of the modern man caught in a hostile universe. Rootlessness and the struggle to transcend the existential crisis brought about by the opposing forces of tradition and modernity find expression in this narrative which seeks to find an alternative to this materialistic world. E.M Forster's *A Passage to India* (1984) which was written on his return to England after a decade's stay in India seeks to negotiate the complexities of colonialism through a young educated physician who unfortunately finds himself caught in the web of race, gender, politics and sex. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980) which shows the teething pains of a new born nation as it tries to break free from the shackles of the empire caught as it is in the colonial grip is another picture of despondency and angst. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), featuring short stories about Indians who have settled down in the States, speaks of alienation, the disconnect and a sense of loss between their homeland and their adopted land. Despite all the hurdles that come their way, the struggle of the characters to find a common identity bridges the gap between cultures and individuals. V.S.Naipaul's *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1976) is a scathing attack on India, the country of his origin, which he feels has withdrawn into itself after long years of colonization. Reviewing the situation during the period of Emergency in India, he does not mince words in his description of Indians, their thinking, way of life, and the importance given to the mystical over the rational.

CONCLUSIONS

The fields of Comparative literature and Translation studies assume great significance in the understanding of cultures, more so in the 21st century where the socio-cultural analysis of global trends is being looked at with interest, in order to build or strengthen bridges across disciplinary borders .Globalization has increased the need to learn about each other as well as each other's culture. Through the world of literature in all its myriad forms, prose or poetry, truth or fiction, the purpose is served to overcome cultural barriers and to understand individual and cultural differences. The globalization of education will help promote an understanding of the values of the many world cultures, as well as the basic concepts and principles related to the respective communities, bringing about in the process a better understanding of different cultures and the pluralistic nature of the societies that make up this world. Hence, incredible as it may seem, literature is a powerful tool having the potential to bridge the gap across cultures.

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